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ABSTRACT

This paper examines available information on early identification of students at risk of prematurely dropping out of school. Many factors such as drug use, lowered educational achievement, delinquency, and unemployment appear to be consequences of dropping out, yet cause and effect is often difficult to define. A variety of school related, personal, and familial factors have nevertheless been identified as predictors of dropping out; these include such factors as low perceived school relevance, poor grades, misbehavior, friends dropping out, and lack of parental monitoring. Development of an effective profile for early identification of at-risk students may involve the incorporation of the strengths of several approaches. Needs assessment methods, retrospective analysis of local data to determine historical trends, potential dropout identification instruments, teacher rating and referral methods, and tracking students as they meet critical at-risk criteria are all ways to identify potential dropouts. The level and nature of a student's risk of premature exit from school should be viewed within the context of the student's particular school, family, and personal characteristics. (BHK)

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# At-Risk Students: A Profile for Early Identification

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Abstract

The complexity of the school dropout problem presents serious challenges to today's educators. Early identification of students at-risk of dropping out is an essential component of effective dropout prevention programs. The level and nature of a student's risk of premature exit from school should be viewed in the context of the student's particular school, family, and personal characteristics.

# At-Risk Students: A Profile for Early Identification

The long history of concern over the school dropout problem, as evidenced by the large number and scope of research studies, has led to little agreement on possible solutions to the problem (Morrow, 1986). Even though research on at-risk students has been extensive, Walters and Kranzler (1970) were surprised to find little empirically based information on early identification of these students. This paper examines available information on early identification of students at-risk for prematurely exiting school.

The recent increase in attention given the school dropout problem may be attributed to several factors: (a) concern for the plight of potential dropouts as schools raise graduation requirements and performance standards (Hamilton, 1986), (b) increase in enrollment of minority students in schools, (c) belief that the future will require a more educated work force, and (d) political efforts aimed at the dropout problem (Rumberger, 1987).

Although the consequences of dropping out are not well documented or understood (Natriello, Pallas, & McDill, 1986), many factors such as drug use (Mensch, & Kandel, 1988), lowered educational achievement (Ekstrom,

Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986), unemployment (Caliste, 1984), delinquency (Hartnagel & Krahn, 1989), appear to be consequences of dropping out. However, the complexity of the dropout problem, which may also be also be viewed as a symptom arising from other problems, makes definition of cause and effect difficult (Natriello, et al., 1986).

Similar difficulties are confronted when attempting to determine characteristics of at-risk students. Mann (1986a) pointed out that almost any program designed to help students is often labeled as a "dropout prevention program". Even though a school dropout could possess all or none of the traditional at-risk characteristics, many methods of identification (e. g., Alpert & Dunham, 1986; Lloyd, 1978; Mathis, 1976; North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction, 1987) are additive: The student with more identified risk factors has a greater potential to leave school early.

## Identification of Potential Dropouts

A number of personal and environmental factors have been identified as characteristic of at-risk students. A comprehensive list of factors commonly used for identification are presented in Figure 1 (Dade County Public Schools, 1986; Mathis, 1976; Miller, 1986; Mizell, 1987; North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction, 1987; Trusty & Dooley-Dickey, 1990).

FIGURE I

At-Risk Student Identification Factors

| | |
|---|---|
| **School Related Factors** | |
| *Behind in grade level | *Poor grades, failures |
| *Low perceived school relevance | *Misbehavior in school |
| Dislike school | Lack basic skills |
| Truancy, tardiness | Dislike teachers |
| Non-involvement in activities | Low motivation |
| Suspensions | Boredom |
| Poor study habits | Alienation |
| **Personal Factors** | |
| *Friends dropped out | Poor social skills |
| Disability | Drug use |
| Pregnancy, parent | Poor coping skills |
| Depression | Basic needs not met |
| Lack of goal orientation | Impulsiveness |
| **Familial Factors** | |
| Low socioeconomic status | Family mobility |
| *Lack of parental monitoring | Family conflicts |
| Low parental education level | Divorce |
| Parental unemployment | Economic |
| Negative parental attitudes | Death of parent(s) |

* identified by Alpert & Dunham (1986) as predictors

Although most authors have agreed that early identification of at-risk students is a necessary component of any dropout prevention program (e. g., Alpert & Dunham, 1986; Larsen & Shertzer, 1987; Rumberger, 1987; Trusty & Dooley-Dickey, 1990; Walters & Kranzler, 1970), a variety of identification methods have been utilized. This variety may exist because different types of at-risk students have different needs, and effective dropout prevention programs are aimed at meeting the individual needs of students (Rumberger, 1987; Hahn, Danzberger & Lefkowitz, 1987).

Needs Assessment Methods

Needs assessments are often employed as instruments of at-risk student identification. A needs assessment that works to determine specific local needs and priorities appears more effective than reliance on the conclusions of national surveys (Gastright & Ahmad, 1988; Miller, 1986). Grossnickle (1986) indicated that a school dropout may not possess any of the traditionally accepted at-risk characteristics. The desirability of a localized approach is strengthened by the widely held belief that schools' contribution to the dropout problém is paramount (Fine & Rosenberg, 1986; Natriello, et al., 1986; Pittman, 1986; Tidwell, 1988; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Natriello et al. (1986) describe the decision to drop out as the

result of an interaction of student characteristics and school processes. Needs assessment methods have employed student and/or teacher interviews; questionnaires or surveys completed by students and school personnel; or comprehensive student, family, school, community assessments.

Retrospective Data Collection Methods

Retrospective identification methods have generally involved analysis of local or national data obtained from: (a) school records, social service records, or research studies (e. g., Lloyd, 1978); or (b) interviews with dropouts or school persisters (e. g., Dunham & Alpert, 1987). Again, locally derived conclusions appear to be more applicable to local needs (Gastright & Ahmad, 1988).

Lloyd (1978) studied the records of school dropouts and persisters. He concluded that as early as the third grade problems on achievement and aptitude tests, grade level retention, and low socioeconomic status were useful in predicting which students were high risk. However, Lloyd (1978) indicated that 25% of the students in his study that graduated were predicted to drop out.

Alpert & Dunham (1986) and Dunham & Alpert (1987) interviewed subjects after they had dropped out of school. Significant predictors are presented in Figure I, however, the authors were careful to point out that dropouts'

responses before and after dropping out may not be consistent (Alpert, & Dunham, 1986).

Tracking Methods

Mann (1986b) suggests the use of computers (database systems) to track students through their school years could be effective in the identification of at-risk students. Many schools in Florida are beginning to use such methods with success. In Jacksonville, Florida students are tracked through their "Individual Student Profile" and referred to appropriate programs and community agencies by teams composed of teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents (Duval County Public Schools, 1987). Issues of confidentiality of student information and consistency with state regulations must be examined when considering tracking options (Newton, Calfee, Mathews, Omer, Reedy, & Malone, 1991).

Potential Dropout Identification Instruments

Instruments of this type have been found to predict subsequent dropouts with 70% to 80% accuracy (Mathis, 1976; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). The Dropout Alert Scale (DAS) is a student completed instrument that uses a Likert type scale to assess student attitudes, school behaviors, and familial factors (Mathis, 1976). This instrument can effectively be used as a needs assessment tool, and it appears to be useful in determining student perceptions

related to at-risk behaviors (Trusty, & Dooley-Dickey, 1990). The DAS has been adopted by several school districts and state education departments in the Southeastern United States (e. g., Cage, 1984; North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction, 1987).

Weber (1988) evaluated several potential dropout identification instruments by using data from a national longitudinal study to test each instrument's accuracy of prediction. He recommended several instruments that appear to be useful in identifying potential dropouts at the high school level.

Teacher Rating and Teacher Referral Methods

Situations in which students see three or more teachers each school day are appropriate for the use of teacher rating methods. The three or more teacher ratings are pooled to place students in various at-risk categories, (e. g. low, moderate, or high). In a study of teacher and student perceptions of at-riskness, Trusty and Dooley-Dickey (1990) found that teacher perceptions and student perceptions were moderately correlated.

The Elementary School Pupil Adjustment Scale (ESPAS), essentially a teacher referral process, has been used to identify at-risk elementary school children (Cage, 1984). However, the authors of this paper (through practical experience), have found the use of the ESPAS inconsistent

among teachers and therefore unreliable when classrooms are self-contained. A number of teacher referral forms are available, and they are best used as screening devices in at-risk student identification (North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction, 1987). After initial identification, professional personnel trained in interview techniques and developmental issues, such as counselors, should complete the identification process (Trusty & Dooley-Dickey, 1991).

## Summary and Conclusions

Development of an effective profile for early identification of at-risk students may involve the incorporation of the strengths of several approaches. Retrospective analysis of local data to determine historical trends might be the basis for the development of needs assessment instruments that clarify local identification criteria. Information from these methods might provide the basis for instruments that focus on early identification of at-risk students by self report and teacher ratings. Tracking students as they meet critical at-risk criteria would then enable the school to react to the needs of individual students.

Although a number of instruments have been used for identification of at-risk students, more longitudinal studies that examine the predictive validity of these

instruments are needed. Pinpointing the characteristics or combinations of characteristics that increase the risk to students is essential. It is also important to determine the environmental factors that are most critical in prediction of premature exit from school.

Dropping out of school is a developmental phenomenon, and identifying and understanding this phenomenon may require a developmental perspective. In constructing a profile for at-risk student identification, each stage of student development must be considered. Also, all personal and school related factors that influence early exit from school must be appraised. Furthermore, the relationship of factors and levels of risk to the individual student should be examined carefully in profiling the at-risk student.

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